

Bill expands businesses' options in workers' comp

It would allow firms to choose who will treat injured workers

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The Chamber of Commerce of Hawaii is hoping to push through the Legislature next year a law that would allow employers to choose who would treat employees injured on the job.

The proposal is intended to cut the cost of workers' compensation insurance by reducing the number of employees who remain off the job for extended

periods. Last year, 15 percent of employees on workers' comp had been off the job for at least a year, while 9 percent were off the job for longer than two years, said Christine Camp Friedman, chairwoman-elect of the chamber's board of directors.

Friedman said employees remain on workers' comp for extended periods because their injuries are not properly diagnosed and treated.

"Sometimes some employees get lost in the system, and they feel guilty that they're hurt," Friedman said. "And so there's a creation of animosity between the employee who feels guilty

and then the employer not knowing what's going on."

The state workers' comp law gives injured workers their choice of physicians or surgeons to treat their injury. The proposal will give employers the option to make the selection in the first 120 days of treatment. After that time the injured worker would be free to choose the medical care provider.

Opponents of the measure fear employers may try to limit their workers' care options, said Rep. Marcus Oshiro (D, Wahiawa-Poamoho), chairman of the House Labor Committee. Oshiro introduced the bill on behalf of the Chamber of Commerce in

the last legislative session but said he did not give it a hearing because the Lingle administration did not take a position on the measure.

Friedman said the Chamber of Commerce did not have time to lobby the administration on behalf of the bill because it did not have a report on the issue until a few days before the deadline to submit proposals in the Legislature.

Since then, she said, the chamber has been spreading the word of its proposal and has talked with the administration about the bill. She said the administration has not indicated its position.